

INTERVIEW

Ex-actress succeeds in new role of author

Ruth Martin talks to American Martha Rofheart

NEXT MONTH, American author Martha Rofheart has the satisfaction of seeing her third novel, *Burning Sappho*, published here as a hardback (Talmy Franklin, March 27 £3.95). Her second novel, *Cry 'God For Glendower'*, makes its initial English paperback appearance (Coronet, March 17, 50p), with a kick-off print run of 40,000 copies, and her first book, *Cry 'God For Harry'*, is re-issued on the same date by Coronet with a further 20,000 copies.

Martha Rofheart is no run-of-the-mill author, as I discovered when she came to London recently from her home in Long Island, New York. An actress for many years (she played in England in 1949, then came over again in the 50's with an American play called 'Detective Story'), she didn't begin writing novels until 1970.

With the decline of her stage career and increasing domestic preoccupations (husband, son), she started writing short stories and got herself an agent, but took a year to get anything published.

'I had marvellous encouragement for the stories, but they were squashed from above because they were too sophisticated or too unslick for magazines. Suddenly I started the *Harry* book.

'I was nervous my agent would drop me because I wasn't sending him any more stories, so I told him what I was doing. I was only about halfway through, but he wanted to see it. He read it right away, and rang me to say he thought it was so good he was going to offer it as it stood. Two days later, he sold it to Putnam's.

'Next time he called, he said: "Sit down! *McCalls* is serialising it!" The following day he called again and said: "*Lie* down! The Book of the Month Club is taking it!" I was so naive — I didn't know they *paid* you, I just thought you got a lot more readers!

'Here was this great sum of money coming in, and people were bidding for the paperback

rights. There was great excitement. But actual publication was a tremendous anti-climax — nothing happens then! It's not like the opening night at the theatre.'

Cry 'God For Harry' is a full-blooded fictional biography of Henry V, of whom a great deal is known. Records are thin indeed about her next two subjects, Owen Glendower and Sappho of Lesbos, but all three books have one thing in common: each story is told in several sections narrated by different people.

'I began this style in *Harry* because he was enigmatic. I never could quite understand him, and I thought that different



Martha Rofheart — 'thinks' herself into her characters.

views of him would make it more apparent how strange he was to throw over his companions; his utter piety, his political sense. I don't think I've written him as a hero — yet all the women fall in love with him!

'Nobody falls in love with Glendower, yet he's a real *bona fide* hero, larger than life, a truly great man. I had to use the same style again because you had to flesh the story out by bringing in Richard II, Chaucer and so on. All that's known about Glendower is from the English side, and that's very biased. The Welsh side was all lost, except in the Bardic poetry, and there's very little of that.

'With *Sappho* I also needed to flesh the story out, otherwise how could I make a lively, adventurous, readable novel out of a poetess who was a Lesbian and a free woman. I wanted to make it really roll.'

And roll it does! Almost 400 pages long, this panoramic Grecian story holds the interest throughout.

Martha Rofheart believes that it's because she's been an actress trained to 'thinking' herself as many people that she is able to write in this particular style. However, in the novel about Cleopatra, on which she's currently engaged, she has departed from it.

Because the formula had been so successful, her editor wanted her to continue in the same vein, but she found herself dissatisfied with her work. 'Suddenly, it hit me what was the matter. Cleopatra was an intellectual, a politically aware woman who knew what was going on in Rome. So she can tell her *own* story — you don't have to get it from other people.

'Anyway, I don't like formulae. Somebody's bound to say: "She's doing it again." It's a trap. I don't want to be in a slot like that. And I don't want to stay always in the genre of historical novelist — I'm practising on it! With my fifth book I'm departing from the historical scene. It will be contemporary, but with flashbacks into history.'

Born in Louisville, Kentucky, Martha Rofheart's parents died when she was young and she was brought up by her Welsh grandparents. She traces her interest in Glendower to hearing about him from her grandfather. He started her on the writing road by giving her a 'quarter' every time she wrote a poem.

Martha's husband has a small advertising agency in New York City and, from Monday to Thursday, lives in their mid-town apartment within walking distance of his office. Martha goes into the city every week or every other week, and also does whatever copywriting is required for the agency.

'I usually write in the morn-

ings, but if I look at the typewriter and find I'm at a block, why, then I just don't write that day. I'll kinda walk around the house and think about it. Sometimes I don't write for a whole week.

'I don't ever re-write or tear anything up. It's got to flow out. The story has to be in my head. I never do a draft. I just type it, xerox it and send it in. It's clean — maybe a word or a sentence scratched out here and there.'

Martha Rofheart and her husband must be among the rareties of the New York/Long Island community. They don't drive. Instead, they make the 120-mile trip from city apartment to seaside house by train.

'It takes three - and - a - half hours, so few people travel by railroad. Everybody goes by plane or clogs the highway.'

They also did until two years ago, when the steering locked on a rented car; they crashed into the barrier and Martha went through the windscreen. Her face was badly slashed but four operations later you'd be hard put to know she had been through such an ordeal.

All this commuting means that they tend not to travel elsewhere around the States. 'But I think I've probably been all over the country, anyway. When I was in the theatre, touring was on its last legs but all the big stars still did it. I went on a whole year's tour with Helen Hayes, and another whole year with the Lunts. We played split weeks in places like Omaha City and, Needles, Arizona — the hottest point in the world; places you wouldn't normally go to.

'Then, I joined an organisation for actresses with experience to volunteer for work in mental hospitals. We were sent out in teams to teach volunteers in other areas.

'It was marvellous for us. They put a thousand dollars a week in our bank, and all our expenses were paid. So you came back from a ten-week tour with ten thousand dollars in the bank, which was a lot of money then. I happened to be sent to the West, and I saw Deadwood, South Dakota, where Jesse James was shot. Who's ever been *there*?

Well, Jesse James and his killer, for a start! That is, if Martha's recollection is right. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, though, that notorious guy met his end at St Joseph's, Missouri. But I see what she means.